

Two Approaches to Study Confucian classics

Introduction to the New Text and the Old Text

Chinese Classics have always been the main body of ancient Chinese scholarship, that is, the doctrine of interpretation and exposition that revolves around the Thirteen Classics of Confucianism. Classicists have commonly utilized two main approaches to study the Confucian classics, the philological and the interpretive. These two approaches to the research of classics represent the two schools of classical scholarship that have been arguing for thousands of years since Western Han period, namely the New Text classicism and the Old text classicism. Textual differences are found between the New Text and the Old Text, as well as between their ways and purposes of scholarship, they often accuse one another of being apocryphal. However, this exclusive academic competition also contributed to the development and prosperity of Chinese classical scholarship. Next, I will give examples of the differences in methodology between the two schools.

As a private school, the Old Text scholars tended to concentrate on textual criticism in terms of philology and historical facts and remained apolitical, while as an officially sanctioned school, one of the major characteristics of the New Text learning was that, it advocates benefiting the nation and society by supporting the imperial regime and provide a theoretical basis for official policy, which had made the scholarly atmosphere of the New Text learning was more or less political overtone;

Examples

Initially, the battle between the two schools were commonly contested on their different interpretations and understandings of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. I have therefore chosen to take *Zuo's Commentary* and *Gongyang's Commentary* as examples.

Zuo's Commentary and *Gongyang's Commentary*, both of which are commentaries of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, show very different styles and commentating approaches. *Zuo's Commentary* represents the Old Text school with its emphasis on the record of historical events and exegesis of the scripture; while *Gongyang's Commentary* is brief in its narration of history, instead, it focus on elucidating the "lofty principles in subtle words" (微言大義) of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, phrased as questions and answers.

For example, the text of the tenth year of Duke Zhuang in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is very concise. Let's see Zuo's commentary on this paragraph. As we can see, Zuo's commentary provides a fascinating depiction of the historical event of the defeat of Qi's division at Changshao, which had become a canon and had included in *Guwen Guanzhi*, entitled Caogui' Discourse on Warfare". Zuo furnished further details of the events that took place in June, September and October. For example, Zuo revealed for the reader the reasons for the destruction of Tan by Qi's division in

October, stating that “As Tan had no manners toward Qi.” This philological approach to the study of the scriptures, which focuses on historical inquiry and the narration of the causes and consequences of the events, leaves the reader free to understand them, also reflects the style of the Old Text school.

Du Yu was an eminent Old Text scholar in Jin dynasty. According to Zuo’s commentary, he further researched the historical place of Yumen mentioned in the event of June, noting that “Yumen is the southern city gate of Lu.” From his annotation we can see the Old Text learning approach to the classics, which insistently focused on historical research, and its simple and pragmatic mode of scholarship.

Compare with Zuo’s commentary, Gongyang’s Commentary gives little account of the event itself, but rich in the interpretation of the wording of the text, such as “Why using the word ‘invade’ in some cases while using ‘attack’ in other cases? For the rough action called invade, the carefully engineered action called attack.” And for the subsequent events, Gongyang continuously pay attention on the hermeneutics of the text, for example, on the event in October, he interpreted that “Why not say ‘out’? As the country has been destroyed, so there is nowhere to come out.” This subjective and oriented style of interpretation, as well as the great concern for terminology and the meaning of wording, show the hallmarks of the New Text school.

He Xiu was the most influential New Text scholar of the *Gongyang’s Commentary* after Dong Zhongshu of the Eastern Han period. His work, *Gongyang’s Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals Explained and Glossed* 春秋公羊解诂, further clarified and sorted out the subtle meanings of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. For example, Gongyang’s commentary stated, “The state has been destroyed, and there is nowhere to come out 国已灭矣，无所出也”, He Xiu further elucidated that “This is to differentiate those who flee from their own state. Confucius said: ‘What the superior man requires is just that in his words there may be nothing incorrect.’” Recording the month is to criticize Tan Zi failed to die a heroic death in his position.” We can see that He Xiu’s commentary quotes the words of the *Analects* as a theoretical basis, reflecting his reverence for Confucius, and at the same time expounding his political ideas with a goal of correcting and assisting the imperial. This embodies a typical method of interpreting classics of the New Text School.

The New Text movement remained dormant from He Xiu until the mid-Qing, and only gradually flourished in the late Qing. Gong Zizhen (1792-1841), a scholar of the New Text School, yet took a negative attitude towards the prophecys and politically religious ideas in New Text learning. At the same time, he made use of the “lofty principles in subtle words” feature of the Gongyang school, to discuss current affairs, turning it into an ideological weapon to criticize the ills of the society and try to influence the politics. It can be said that the purpose of his scholarship was to alert and appeal to people for joining the political reform movement. His thought directly nurtured the idea of the Hundred Days Reform movement 戊戌变法 of Kang Youwei.

Zhang Taiyan (1869-1936), a defender of the Old Text school, was provoked by Gongyang scholars’ onslaught on Zuo’s Commentary, in 1891, he began writing his book *Reading of the Spring and Autumn Annals and Zuo’s Commentary* as a combat. His stand on the Old Text school was based on his insistence and defence on national

history. He worried about the serious consequences of "erasing history" which will shake the foundation of the nation, and then he exclaimed that "The teaching of Confucius was originally based on history" as a result. This concept of "respect for history" reflects the rigorous and rational attitude of the Old Text scholars, who always emphasize the restoration of history.

In my view, the New Text and the Old Text each have their own strengths in their approaches to scholarship, like the two legs of human being, supporting the balance and movement of the body together. In short, the Old Text classicism needs to prove their value through the application of their achievements by the New Text classicism, while the New Text classicism needs to examine their actions through the rational scholarship of the Old Text classicism. As I say, as a modern learner of the Chinese classics, one should take the strengths of both sides, using textual criticism and historical evidence as a basis for understanding and responding to the personal ideas and social needs of innovation and changes.

(All quotations in this paper found in c-text. Quotations from Confucius are translated by James Legge, others are made by the author.)